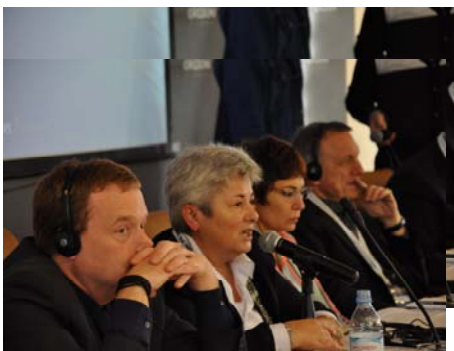


‘Prospects for Reconciliation: Theory and Practice’, Yerevan, 27 November 2010

Conference Report

In five years time, a century will have passed since the ‘events of 1915’, or what is widely recognised as the genocide against the Armenian people, began in the territories of present-day Turkey. Passed down from one generation to the next, the history of the massacres and deportations lives on in the memories of present-day Armenia’s citizens. Although largely silenced for many decades in Soviet Armenia, the question of the Armenian genocide gained renewed political salience in the wake of Armenian national independence (1991) and the war in Nagorno Karabakh with Azerbaijan (1990/1-1994). In response to the war, Turkey closed the border crossing to Armenia in 1993, leading to a freeze of Turkish/Armenian relations throughout the 1990s. The 2000s saw multiple efforts to improve relations between the two countries. These included the TARC – a commission of Armenian and Turkish civil society representatives that from 2001 to 2004 worked on a shared understanding of the countries’ common past –, and the 2008-2010 ‘football diplomacy’ – a period of intense diplomatic negotiations about the normalisation of diplomatic relations, which saw Turkish President Gül visit Yerevan for a football match. However, these initiatives have so far resulted in no tangible results: the border remains closed, and the official accounts about what happened in 1915 and the years that followed have hardly changed. In absence of a solution on the level of national politics, the present conference sought to determine if and how reconciliation could be achieved on the societal level. The participants explored what role memories of the shared past and the violence play in both societies, how a dialogue about the past could contribute to a process of reconciliation between the two countries, and by what means such a dialogue could be conducted in practice.

As one of the first speakers, Mr Matthias Klingenberg, Head of the Asia Department of *dvv international*, located the work on the Armenian/Turkish reconciliation within



the activities of *dvv international*, the German institute for adult education. Within the framework of its History Network, *dvv international* works in various countries of Eastern Europe and Eastern Asia to facilitate the production of ‘history from below’ as a supplement to ‘official history’. The workshop ‘Prospects for Reconciliation’ forms part of a two-year project on ‘Adult Education and Oral

History: Contributing to the Armenia-Turkish Reconciliation’. As part of the project,

young researchers from both countries were educated in oral history methodology. The knowledge gained they then used to conduct interviews in Turkey and Armenia about memories of the shared past, the results of which were published in a book entitled 'Speaking to One Another', co-authored by moderators Dr. Leyla Nyzi of Sabinci University in Turkey and Prof. Hranush Kharatyan of 'Hazarashen', the Armenian Centre for Ethnological Studies, Yerevan State Linguistic University. The project also comprised a summer camp for young adults, during which projects contributing to reconciliation were developed. Next year's activities will include the presentation of a travelling exhibition in Armenia and Turkey and a study trip to Germany.

In his welcoming speech, the German Ambassador in Armenia Mr Hans-Jochen Schmidt drew attention to the reluctance of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs to use the term 'genocide' with regard to the massacres of 1915. This position can be interpreted as an expression of the Ministry's hesitancy to recognise its one-sided support of Turkey and the role it played in crimes committed or supported by German governments in the first half of the 20th century. Ambassador Schmidt then drew attention to the power of images as a tool to trigger debate about responsibilities for past wrongs. As an example he cited a film about the German involvement in the Armenian genocide that was recently presented on German TV. While the emission of the movie was strongly criticised by the Turkish government, Ambassador Schmidt suggested that such strong triggers might be what is needed to initiate changes in thinking.

The ensuing workshop discussions were structured around two panels – the first focussing on analytical concepts and questions of context, and the second on concrete examples of dialogues about history. The discussions of the first panel, titled 'Between the Past and the Present' and moderated by Assoc. Prof. Leyla Nyzi of Sabinci University in Turkey, broadly centred on four topics: the role of the past for reconciliation, the concept of truth, options for establishing a shared account of the past, and the political climate within and between Armenia and Turkey in which such processes are taking place.



The First Panel

The role of the past for reconciliation

In a first contribution, Prof. Elazar Barkan of Columbia University, provided some analytical underpinning for what the second speaker, Mr Hans Gunnar Adén, former Ambassador to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, introduced the German term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: coming to terms with the past. Supporting the rationale of the workshop, Prof. Barkan, who is also founding Director of the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation at the Salzburg Seminar, highlighted the explicit con-

nection between the acknowledgement of human rights violations and conflict resolution. Fear and the memories of catastrophe will not vanish unless they are explicitly dealt with; they will re-emerge over and over again as memories are transferred from one generation to another. This can be seen not only in the Armenian/Turkish case, but also in the relationship between East Asian countries and in the Balkans. Thus, not only the recent past must be addressed when attempting to solve conflict, but memories of memories of atrocities too. Ambassador Adén pointed out the condemnation of the Katyn massacres of 1940 by the Russian Duma as a recent example of such steps.



On a somewhat different note, Dr. Harutyun Marutyan of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Armenian National Academy of Sciences, discussed the effect of memories of the Armenian genocide on Armenia's recent history. He identified the memories as a force contributing to national mobilisation – first in 1965, when mass demonstrations in Yerevan led to the Soviet authorities permitting the construction of the Yerevan Genocide Memorial, and again in the late 1980s/early 1990s, when the first violent clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, combined with the memories of the massacres at the beginning of the 20th century, served to instil a spirit of national resistance in the Armenian people.

The concept of truth

A second topic addressed in the panel's contributions and the ensuing discussion was the concept of truth. Prof. Barkan argued that 'truth' is often overrated. If we speak of historic truth, we should not expect to arrive at truth in the sense of legal, authoritatively defined truth; rather, as the case of the on-going reconciliation between Germany and Israel shows, the search for historical truth must be seen as a process.

Likewise commenting on the topic of multiple truths, Dr. Leyla Neyzi, co-author of the book published within the framework of the project, reported of her astonishment when conducting oral history research in Turkey. Despite decades of the Turkish government actively trying to cover up what happened in 1915 and after, memories of the massacres and deportations of this period are awake among the Turkish and Kurdish inhabitants of the regions where Armenians used to live. Officially decreed truth, she concludes, cannot in all cases replace local truths.

However, Prof. Hranush Kharatyan, the second co-author, pointed out that she was often surprised at how little was known about the genocide among respondents in other areas of Turkey. For some respondents in Istanbul, she recalled, '1915' meant nothing.

Options for establishing a shared account of the past

Discussing methods that can be employed to address a shared past, Prof. Barkan pointed to the writing of common histories as a valuable tool for conflict resolution. This, he argued, is best done using facts scientifically established by scholars of both sides, who should then, in a second step, disseminate the results of their discussions to their respective publics – a necessary action scholars unfortunately often shy away from.

For Dr. Marutyan, the best way to establish a shared understanding of the past would be through a sustained debate between Turkish and Armenian scholars, this emitted simultaneously in both Turkey and Armenia. It would then be left to the respective audiences to form their own understanding. This process would have the advantage of receiving publicity. Dr. Marutyan contrasted this idea with the TARC that met *in camera* and was therefore not very effective in changing perceptions of the past.



On the possibilities of a dialogue between the two societies, Ms Diba Nigar Göksel of the European Stability Initiative, Turkey, added that such discussions must be led in an open fashion, without preconceptions. She explained that not only in Armenia, but also in the parts of Turkish society where the ‘events of 1915’ are recognised as genocide, outsiders to the debate – such as Turkish youth – are sometimes denied the option of exploring the question. While in official Turkish circles it is a taboo to talk about genocide, in those groups it is a taboo to question whether it was genocide that took place.

Ms Göksel also cautioned that debates between the two societies should not be based on false assumptions, citing as examples the belief of the Turkish side that opening the border would stop Armenian efforts to have the genocide recognised by foreign political bodies, and the hope by the Armenian side that the Turkish government might recognise the genocide some time soon. If societal dialogue were to be based on such false preconceptions, it would always remain volatile as it could easily be spoiled by disappointment about unfulfilled hopes.

Analysing the conflict as being principally about identity and cultural differences, Ambassador Adén argued that what is needed in both countries is political maturity, which, he suggested, could be achieved through the further rapprochement of both countries towards the EU. However, in the ensuing debate a discussant objected that with the chances of Turkey joining the EU becoming ever more bleak, this option is waning.

Speaking from the perspective of an international lawyer, panellist Dr. Yeghishe Kirakosyan of Yerevan State University argued that in order to achieve ‘restorative jus-

tice', it would be useful to institute a form of legal claims body. Such a claims body, which should include international lawyers from abroad, should be responsible for deciding on possible forms of retribution (moral or material) for committed wrongs. Since retribution forms an essential part of the judicial concept of justice, such a process, according to Dr. Kirakosyan, would be a precondition for achieving full reconciliation.

Prof. Kharatyan remarked that in the debate about the genocide in Armenia, the need to clearly attribute responsibility is often overlooked. Often, simply 'the Turks' are blamed, although hardly any actual perpetrator is still alive, and substantial parts of the Turkish population only settled there after 1915. In order to come to terms with the past, a much clearer picture of the perpetrators and the ideology supporting them should be drawn.

The political climate for processes of reconciliation

In their respective contributions, Ms Göksel, Mr Alexander Iskandaryan, Director of the Caucasus Institute in Armenia, and Dr Hovhannisyan, Head of the Centre of Civilization and Cultural Studies, Armenia, analysed the political climate between and within Turkey and Armenia, in which the recent initiatives for reconciliation took place.



Mr Iskandaryan mainly sought to explain how the 'football diplomacy' and its seeming failure came about. In terms of foreign policy, he explained, there were and are no real obstacles to a diplomatic rapprochement. While Armenia has a 'technical' interest in the opening of the border – it would gain access to vital transportation and communication lines – for the Turkish government, the opening would be of 'strategic' value, as the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Armenia would permit Turkey to yield influence in the whole of the Caucasus and thus foster its ambitions as a regional player. The failure of the 'football diplomacy' was thus a result of domestic politics. In Turkey, nationalist politicians mobilised against the rapprochement, arguing for pan-Turkic solidarity with Azerbaijan; in Armenia, opposition towards the opening centred around the non-recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Turkish government.

Ms Göksel outlined the changing conditions within Turkish society and politics that have made possible a more open discussion about the Turkish/Armenian past during the last decade. She noted that Turkey has been undergoing a process of democratisation and increasing freedom of expression, which has enabled Turkish intellectuals and civil society to critically question the official version of what happened in 1915. As examples, she cited the 2005 conference in Bogazici University, at which Turkish scholars openly discussed the question of genocide, and the response to the murder of Hrant Dink in 2007, when Turkish citizens openly showed their solidarity with Ar-

menians. Another change has been the development of a vibrant and critical NGO scene during the last decade, which has recently also received more positive attention from the Turkish press. These signs of progress, Ms Göksel lamented, were often not acknowledged as such by the Armenian public.

Notwithstanding these developments, Ms Göksel cautioned that mobilising the population of Turkey for a serious discussion about the Armenia/Turkey relationship remains to be a challenge for civil society actors, not least due to the difficulty of reaching a critical mass of the large Turkish population, and its preoccupation with other issues, such as the 'Kurdish question' and Cyprus. Ms Göksel cited the lack of reliable data on which factors (for example the memory of the massacres of 1915 as such, the Karabakh question, and fear of Armenian claims) influence the Turks' perception of their relationship with Armenia as a further obstacle, and suggested that research into this should be conducted.

Ms Göksel's contribution triggered strong reactions from the plenum. Mr Iskandaryan hinted at the ambivalence of freedom of speech: not only can this right be used by proponents of reconciliation, but also nationalists with the aim of halting rapprochement. Dr. Neyzi remarked that while changes may have taken place, the way the Turkish state relates to minority groups has only been changing very recently – as could be seen in the way the Turkish state has treated its Kurdish population for most part of the century. One of the discussants criticised Ms Göksel for failing to name the biggest obstacle to dialogue: the Turkish government, which continued to promote its version of history in which Turks are free of guilt. Commenting on this response, Prof. Barkan cautioned that it is of little use to focus on the radical forces within each country; rather, in order to achieve dialogue, we should focus on the more moderate actors in each society, and aim to build trust between these forces first.

In his contribution to the panel, Dr Hovhannisyan, who led the Armenian delegation conducting negotiations with the Turkish side from 1998 to 2001, and was a member of the TARC from 2001 to 2004, demonstrated his scepticism towards the potential for reconciliation on the level of high politics. Dr Hovhannisyan recounted that in the TARC discussions his Turkish colleagues showed themselves quite flexible with regard to recognising the events of 1915, but that despite this, the findings of the commission did not lead to political action. He evaluated that while for the Turkish side the Armenian/Turkish relations served as a mere gambling card in the Turkish relationship with Western Countries, for Armenia the non-recognition of the genocide remains an existential question. Given that the Turkish government is supporting Azerbaijan militarily, Armenians still feel existentially threatened, fearing the repetition of genocide against their people.



The Second Panel

Civic initiatives

Moderated by Prof. Hranush Kharatyan, the second panel on 'Civic Initiatives' aimed to explore concrete examples of dialogue about history between peoples enmeshed in conflict.

The panel contributions were opened by Dr. Hasan Samani of the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, Cyprus. Dr. Samani recalled the history of the Cypriot conflict and introduced the audience to the newest project of his association, the 'House for Cooperation', which is placed in the so-called death-zone between the two Cypriot states and is thus accessible to members of ethnic groups on the island.

In his presentation, Dr. Chugaszyan, Executive Director of the Information Technologies Foundation, Armenia, introduced the plenum to an online project pioneered by his foundation – a website that collects information on the Armenian artist Komitas who, born in Turkey in the late nineteenth century, represents the shared history of the two peoples of that period. The idea of the project is that in discussing the life of the artist online, Armenian and Turkish youth will come closer to a shared understanding of their past. Dr. Chugaszyan further explained that new media and technologies may open up new ways of initiating dialogues between Turks and Armenians. Given the exponential growth in the use of social networks such as Facebook, he suggested that data generated during online communications could be used for analysis. The insights gained could then be used to design more targeted programmes for dialogue and reconciliation.

Ms Seda Grigoryan, who conducted interviews in Armenia for the dvv-international oral history project, gave a personal account of her experience within the project and, in particular, of her encounter with her Turkish peers involved in the project. Meeting and working with Turkish students was, for her, an intriguing experience. Collaborating intensively, they became genuine friends. Participants took pride in engaging openly with each other, and felt that they were making steps towards sincere dialogue. Yet at the same time, Ms Grigoryan was upset by the lack of knowledge her Turkish peers demonstrated concerning Armenian and Turkish common history and the genocide, and even came to question the necessity and possibility of 'reconciliation' between the two peoples. When the group conducted their joint research in Istanbul, they found the 'Armenian issue' to be of 'little importance' within Turkish society; in Armenia, however, it remains a painful part of daily life.



The last panellist of the day, Mr Ismail Keskin of Bogazici University, who also participated in the oral history project, introduced the plenum to the work he is preparing together with five fellow students from Turkey. The team is producing a

documentary movie entitled 'Nor & Eski' ('new & old', in Armenian and Turkish), which includes footage of oral history interviews and landscapes in both Armenia and Turkey. By filming in Bithynia, a region in Western Turkey (the old) and Yerevan Nor Butaniya, a quarter of Yerevan (the new), the project team seeks to deconstruct the absolute truths 'full of heroes and traitors' that can be found in the school textbooks of the two countries, and to reconstruct a history in which 'life flourishes'.

The conference was organised by dvv international in collaboration with "Hazarashen", the Armenian Centre of Ethnological Studies, and Andalu Kültür, Turkey, and was founded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany.